A BIRD'S EYE VIEW OF THE MAITHILĪ LANGUAGE

By

Shri Shaktidhar Jha

1. Maithilī is the mother-tongue of nearly 2.10 crore people of North Bihar. It is one of the most advanced and important languages of the N.I.A. branch of the Indo-European family. The immortal poet Vidyāpati enriched this language with his unparalleled lyrical poetry and placed it at an exalted position in the 15th century A.D. It is not a small tribute to this language that it is equally claimed by both Bengalees and non-Bengalees as their own language. But this state of things proved fatal to this language and jeopardised its dignity as a separate language.

2. It is very unfortunate that no native students of the land have come forward to undertake researches on the subject concerned.[1] Naturally the place of the language has been hanging in balance. Sometimes it has been dragged to the group of Eastern Hindi and sometimes has been included in the group of the languages of the Māgadhī-origin. Thus the existence of the language as an independent speech has been at stake at present. This assimilating tendency of the non-Maithilī-speakers and the lamentable indifference of the Maithilas have gone so far that the members of the ruling class in the State and at Centre thought it worth while to deny it a separate status and thus the language has been robbed of its dignified position of the past.

3. Scholars are of divided opinions on the origin of this language. Some of the linguists hold that Maithilī has descended from the Māgadhī dialect and class it with Bengalī, Oriyā and other languages of the Māgadhī-origin. Sir G. Grierson and Dr. S. K. Chatterjee are prominent among them. But some scholars headed by Dr. Hoernle are of the view that Maithilī is a sister language of the Eastern Hindi which has originated from the Ardha-Māgadhī dialect. Dr. Dhirendra Varma is of the same opinion as Dr. Hoernle.

4. But after a close analysis of this language and on the survey of the geographical situation of the land to which this language belongs and on the study of the sound system, vocables and declensional and conjugational patterns of the language in question, we are led to think that Maithilī is the daughter of the Ardha-Māgadhī dialect and is an independent langauge of Bihar. It is not the so-called daughter of the Māgadhī but is a direct descendant of the Ardha-Māgadhī dialect.

---

[1] Dr. S. Jha's thesis, when published, will throw a flood of light on the subject.

5. The term "Ardha-Māgadhī" has been explained in various ways by different scholars. Some see in this dialect the elements of both Māgadhī and Śaurasenī while others take it to be the language of the half of Magadh.

6. On the analysis of the Maithilī sound-system we find in this language the Ardha-Māgadhī elements in greater number than the Māgadhī ones. For example, the original 'r' in the Ardha-Māgadhī is kept intact and sometimes even 'l' is changed to 'r', e.g. Kila—Kira. This tendency of cerebralisation of the dental 'l' is carried to the greater number in the Maithili language and almost all the original 'l' of the old Indo-Aryan and the derived 'l' of the middle Indo-Aryan period have been changed to 'r' in this speech. The following examples in this case will testify this point fully.

Original & M.I.A.	*Maithilī*
Chāgal	Chāgar
Kajjal	Kājar
Jwālan	Jāran
Dhuli	Dhuri
Vijuli	Vijurī
Kelā	Kerā
Haldi	Haradi
Bādal	Bādar
Kāli	Kāri
Kadalī	Kararī
Ujjvala	Ujjar

The above examples can be multiplied by any number in the Maithili language.

7. Moreover, the Ardha-Māgadhī word Nangala < lāngūla is used in this language in the same sense with certain modification in the sound system which shows a gradual development from the M.I.A. dialet. Thus Maithilī is the only language which uses the word Nāngari < (ṅangala <lāngūla) in the sense of tail. On the other hand the languages of the Māgadhī origin such as Bengalī and others use 'leje' and other words in that sense, while Hindi uses pūnch < (puccha) to convey the same. The Ardha-Māgadhī term 'talabara' signifying the sense of a wealthy person (ucbāsagadasāo) is current in Maithilī in the same sense.

8. The adverbial phrases of time like Kahiā, Jahiā and tahiā, current in the Maithilī language are the reminiscent of the Ardha-Māgadhī words kaiā, jaiā and taiā (ucttrādhyayanasūtra and also introduction to Ardha-Māgadhī by Dr. Ghatāje). Again, the term 'Māhura' used in the sense of poison reminds us of the A. M. Māhura (ucbāsagadasāo).

9. One of the most interesting and important features of the Maithilī is the preservation of these two elements, viz. 'bh' and 'h' in the verbal

forms of the √ bhū. This feature is equally shared by Rājasthānī and other N.I.A. languages of the Śaurasenī origin. For example, in the Rājasthānī dialect we have 'hota' and 'bhaī' forms which exhibit the two elements intact. Thus we have in the Rājasthānī :

"Bānsa charhi naṭanī kahai *hota* na naṭiyo koya.
Main naṭa kī naṭanī *bhai* naṭaya so naṭanī *hoya.*
—Rājasthanī-rā-dohā, N. Swāmi

—In the above quoted 'Dohā' we find 'h' element in the future and 'bh' in the past tense.

10. Awadhī also shows the same feature, i.e. 'bhayā' and 'bhai' in the past and 'hoi' in the future, for example, 'asa kahi kuṭila *bhaī* so ṭhārhi;' Raghuvansinha Maha jaha koi *hoī*, etc.

11. On a critical and comparative study of the forms we find that Maithilī is one with these languages so far as the 'h' and 'bh' elements are concerned. In Maithilī we have 'bhela' in the past tense and 'hoyata' in the future, e.g.

(*a*) Biṣama sutā suta upagata *bhela* (Vidyāpati)
(*b*) Jan Buḍha *Hoyata jamaya* (,,)

12. On the contrary, the languages of the Māgadhī origin exhibit only 'h' element, i.e. Bengalī, Halo (past), Habe (future).

13. The change of 'l' to 'n', which is observed in the Ardha-Māgadhī word Nangala < lāngūla is found in the Maithilī in greater number. Thus we have nahu < laghu, nene < lele etc.

14. The geographical condition of Mithilā is of greater importance in this matter. Mithilā is described as a land which has the Ganges in the south, the river Kosī in the east, the Himālayas in the north and the Gandak river in the west. This geography of the land also proves that the language of Mithilā must have been Ardha-Māgadhī and not Māgadhī. From the Jaina Canonical Works we learn that Lord Mahavira delivered his discourses in local language, viz. Ardha-Māgadhī (Bhagavañca ṇaṁ Addha-Māgahīe bhāsāe dhammaṁācikkhai). It is evident that this language was the mother-tongue of the surrounding areas of Vaisālī which is nearly 16 miles in the south-west of Muzaffarpur. Thus the language of Muzaffarpur, which is the central district of Mithilā, and of other adjacent districts of the province in question must have been Ardha-Māgadhī.

15. Often mention of Videha in the Jain canonical works also lends support to this view. The Jains hold the land of Videha in the highest esteem. It is the natural tendency of all men to show high regard for their own land. As such, Videha must have been the land of the Ardha-Māgadhī-speaking people. In the *Namipavvajja* of the 'Uttarādhyayanasūtra' we have a very splendid picture of Mithilā and of her illustrious ruler Nami. The famous verse which shows king Nami's unique detachment from the worldly objects is current in Mithilā even today with its Sanskrit version

(cf Mihilāc dajjhamāṇīc ṇa me kiñcaṇa dajjhae, uttarādhyayanasūtra, Mithilāyām pradagdhāyām na me kiñchana dahyate or name dahati pāvakaḥ).

16. From these observations we are to conclude that Jain writers must have been the inhabitants of Videha (Mithilā) to which Lord Mahāvīra was associated and as such the language of the land would have been Ardha-Māgadhī. This fact satisfactorily accounts for the fundamental differences between Maithilī and Magahī. Though Dr. Grierson has included all the three languages of Bihar (Maithilī, Magahī and Bhojapurī) in one group and has considered them sprung from one and the same dialect, viz. Māgadhī, Maithilī is absolutely different from the rest two on account of its peculiar sound-system and verbal dissimilarities. Dr. S. K. Chatterjee also has considered these languages as three independent languages of Bihar. He observed—"Three Bihārī languages, viz. Bhojapurī Magahī and Maithilī are three separate languages and not merely three dialects of the same language"—The Linguistic question, *Hindusthan Standard*, 1954.

17. The rooted dislike of the Maithilas for Magadha and its speech also explains this idea. They call Magahī a vulgar speech and designate the land as Bhadeś. The main reason for this dislike is the abundance of 'l' in the Magahī language. From the early Vedic Age Mithilā has been the centre of Brahmanical religion and Sanskrit learning. As such, the Maithilas have a dislike for Māgadhism which was natural. They must have been fully alive to Patañjali's critical observation on the use of corrupt speech, e.g. *Te-surā helayo helaya iti kurvantaḥ parābabhūvuḥ. Tasmāt Brāhmaṇena na mlechhitavai nāpabhāṣitavai. Mlecchoha vā eṣa yad-apa-śabdaḥ etc.* Though the growth and development of a language is spontaneous, yet modification of certain sounds is more or less dependent on the habits and nature of the people of the particular land. This accounts for the various trends of a language at different periods.

18. Here it must be noted that the Maithilī sound-system shows greater affinity to the Awadhī language of the 'Rāmcharit Mānas' of Tulsidas and the 'Padmāvat' of Jayasi than to the Bengālī language. In the substitution of 'r' for 'l' both Awadhī and Maithilī are one and the same. A critical perusal of Awadhī on one hand and that of the Maithilī on the other hand will lend a strong support to this point. In both the languages the conjunctive infinitives end in 'i', e.g. Aw, Chāri; Maith, Chāri & Chori, Aw. Pakhārī; M. Pakhārī, Aw. Kari, Paḍhi, Pūchi etc. derived from the M.I.A. Kariya, Puchiya and Paḍhiya etc.

19. Thus these instances of similarities between the two languages go a long way to prove that both the languages drew on the same source, viz. Ardha-Māgadhī. Hence to call Maithilī a Māgadhī language only on the ground of some suffixal similarities between the Maithilī and the languages of the Māgadhī-origin does not appeal to us.

20. The main reason of including Maithilī in the group of the languages of Māgadhī-origin is the formation of the past tense by adding the suffix 'la' or 'l' to the root in these languages and framing of the future tense by the help of the suffix 'va'. But the sound-system, vocables and declensional and conjugational peculiarities are of greater importance than that. Moreover, the 'va' and 'la' elements in the future and past tenses are not the exclusive features of the Māgadhī languages alone. The words like 'calav, jāyav jāiv; gayal, gail; bhayal, bhail; āyat āit and hamarā, toharā are equally current at Banaras, Gajipur and Gorakhpur etc., which are roughly the eastern Hindi-speaking areas (cf Hindi Sāhitya kā itihāsa, Rām Chandra Śukla, p. 26).

21. So far as the sound-system and nominal and pronominal inflections are concerned, Maithilī is more akin to Awadhī than to any other language. The natives of modern Mithilā sing the Awadhī songs with the same felicity as they sing the Maithilī ones. And sometimes it seems rather difficult to differentiate between the two. A few examples from the Rāmāyaṇa of Tulsidas will suffice to show the outstanding similarities between the two languages. The Rāmāyaṇa reads "*Pada Pakhāri jalapāna kari*" etc., and Maithilī, too uses, the same phrase (of course, with certain modifications which are certainly the later development). We have the expressions like '*āvait dekhi*,' '*jāit dekhi*' '*jau na jāyav*' in Maithilī which remind us of the phrases like '*āvat dekhi*' etc. in the Rāmāyaṇa. Again, phrases like "*samujhi rājasukh dukhit arāti avan anal iv sulagai chāti*", "*saral vacan nrip ke suni*" etc. and "*pharai ki kodav bāli susāli*" etc. can be equally claimed by the Maithilas as belonging to their own language. Again, the following lines are practically the same as in Maithilī: Aw. *Puni āuv ehi beriān kāli*, M. *Puni āyav ehi beriyā kālhi*, Aw. *sevat tohi sulabha phal chāri*, M. the same.

The imperative mood in both Maithilī and Awadhī is almost the same, e.g. sunu, karu, jāh, jāha, karaḥ etc. From these points of similarity between these two languages we are to conclude that both the languages are the descendants of the same dialect, i.e. Ardha-Māgadhī and they should be classed as languages belonging to the central group.

23. As the development of the Maithilī and Bengālī languages is not an isolated phenomenon, it is natural that there should be some verbal similarities between the two. On account of early cultural and social contact between Mithilā and Bengal both the provinces were greatly influenced by each other. There was an inflow and outflow of thought and language within and without these areas. Since the 10th century A.D. Bengālī scholars began to frequent the province of Mithilā and drew a vast store of knowledge from the Maithilas. In this process they, too, influenced the Maithilī language, literature and culture immensely. This current of cultural and linguistic exchange continued up to the 17th century A.D. The Maithila poet Vidyāpati (15th century A.D.) was greatly influenced by the lyrical poems of Jayadeva, while Chaitanya Mahāprabhu found

blissful solace in the songs of Vidyāpati. As a result of this intimate tie between the two provinces Maithilī language began to shed off its individuality at the hands of the inhabitants of Bengāl and those ingenious saints modified the songs of Vidyāpati according to their own choice and thus gave the Maithilī language the colour of their own speech. This tendency of modification grew so strong that the language of Vidyāpati's songs began to be called Bengālī, nay, even Vidyāpati was believed to have belonged to Bengāl. Thus it was natural to include both Maithilī and Bengālī in the same group.

24. One of the most salient feature of the Ardha-Māgadhī dialect is the phenomenon of Yaśruti. Accroding to this phenomenon a 'y' is inserted at the place of a dropped intervocalic consonant. Thus, in the Ardha-Māgadhī dialect we have sata—saya, gatam—gayam, gajendra—gayinda etc. This special peculiarity of the A.Mg. is abundantly observable in the Maithilī language. For instances, we have gāyav < gātavva < gātayyam, pāyav < pātavva < pattavva < prāptavyam, jāyav < jātavva < yātavyam etc. Though this element is also found in Bengālī and other N.I.A. languages but that can be explained away as the Ardha-Māgadhī influence on those languages. Here it must be noted that Hemchandra prescribes Yaśruti irrespective of dialectical differences. According to his rule "Avarno yaśruthḥ" we can insert 'y' in the place of a dropped intervocalic consonant. But the MSS show that this 'y' of lighter nature is not inserted in other dialects such as Mahārāṣṭri Śaurasenī and others. In the Gāthās of Hāla we find series of only vowels placed side by side without the interference of this. From these examples we can conclude that this yaśruti was an exclusive feature of the Ardha-Māgadhī. Thus we can judge how far the Maithili language is indebted to our Jain Prākṛit.

25. Moreover, the phenomenon of substituting ś for s, which is a peculiarity of the Māgadhī dialect, is totally absent in the Maithilī language. We can find innumerable examples of this peculiarity in the languages of Māgadhī-origin. The Bengālī language exhibits this feature in greater number in which perhaps even dental 's' is pronounced and even written as the palatal one. On the other hand, Maithilī, like the A.Mg. uses dental 's' for all the three sibilants.

26. Again, the change of 'Ny' to ññ, which is observed in the Ardha-Māgadhī (Śaurasenī) dialect of the Dramas of Aśvaghoṣa, is greatly found in the Maithilī language. In this language we have kaniñā for kanyā which is certainly the modified form of the word Kaññā.

27. From these instances we are bound to say that the inclusion of Maithilī in the group of the languages of the Māgadhī-origin does not seem tenable.

28. One of the most interesting features of the Maithilī language is the use of the word 'āi' (ĀI) in the sense of today beside the famous N.I.A. word 'āj' which is current in almost all the modern Indo-Aryan dialects.

The early history of this language shows that before and during the age of Vidyāpati both words, i.e. āj (ĀJ) and āi (ĀI) were current. But at later stage the latter superseded the former. And now-a-days the upper classes use 'āi' exclusively, while the people belonging to the lower stratum of society use both 'āi' and 'āj.' Now, from the study of Hemchandra who enjoins 'y' for 'dy', j and 'y' in the Māgadhi dialect, we are prompt to think that the Maithilī 'āi' is the descendant of the Māgadhī 'ayya' which has developed from the word 'adya'. But on the study of the prakṛits of the dramas of Aśvaghoṣa we find that the Śaurasenī and Ardha-Māgadhī passages of the dramas show the development of 'dya' into 'yya'. Now we can safely conclude that 'āi' of the Maithilī language is the developed form of the early Ardha-Māgadhī 'ayya' which, through the intermediate stage of 'āya', gave rise to 'āi' by vocalising the semi-vowel 'y' to pure vowel, i.e. 'i'. Moreover, the change of 'j' to 'y', as Hemchandra prescribes for the Māgadhī dialect, is totally absent in Maithilī. On the other hand, Maithilī changes almost all initial 'y' to 'j' which also goes in favour of its being a derivative of the Ardha-Māgadhī dialect which changes all initial 'y' to 'j'. Thus, forms like Bengālī 'ye' for Maithilī 'je', Bengālī 'yakhana', Maithilī 'jahana' and 'jakhana', Bengālī yāiva, Maithilī jāyav etc. lend a strong support to the proposition that Bengālī and Maithilī are the descendants of the Māgadhī and Ardha-Māgadhī dialects respectively and Maithilī is an independent language of Bihar but not a dialect of Hindi as some of the scholars think.

29. It is almost an established fact that if a serious native student of Mithilā comes to explore the untrodden field of this language, which has its roots in the composition of Kukaripā and Sarahapā as early as 8th Century A.D., many facts will come out to focus a flood of light on the language of which a great scholar of the world wide fame like Dr. S. K. Chatterjee says—"We need not mention anything about Maithilī. It is a rich and old language and it is re-asserting its right powerfully. The movement is well known to require detailed mention. Even great scholars like Dr. Amar Nāth Jhā (unfortunately he is no more among us) and Dr. Umeśa Miśra have put in a powerful impassioned plea for Maithilī, which they are proud to proclaim as their mother-tongue"—The Lingustic Question—*Hindustan Standard,* 1954.

THE JOURNAL
OF THE
BIHAR RESEARCH SOCIETY

VOL. XLIII MARCH-JUNE, 1957 PARTS I & II



PUBLISHED BY
THE BIHAR RESEARCH SOCIETY, PATNA

Price Rs. 10/-